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ABSTRACT

This project explored the effects of slow tempo classical music on children's on-task performance during independent writing. The project sample consisted of 24 students from a first grade classroom in the New York City Public School System. The students' on-task behavior was observed with and without use of slow tempo classical music playing, and writing samples were collected. The results indicated that slow tempo classical music had a positive effect on children's on-task behavior. Contains a 14-item bibliography. (Author/MM)

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DOES LISTENING TO SLOW TEMPO CLASSICAL MUSIC DURING INDEPENDENT WRITING AFFECT CHILDREN'S ON-TASK PERFORMANCE?

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Does Listening to Slow Tempo Classical Music During Independent Writing Affect Children's On-Task Performance?

Abstract

This project explores the effects of slow tempo classical music on children's on-task performance during independent writing. The project consisted of twenty-four students from a first grade in the New York City Public School System. The students' on-task behavior was observed with and without the use of slow tempo classical music playing, and writing samples were collected. The results indicated that slow tempo classical music had a positive effect on children's on-task behavior.

Introduction

In many New York City school districts, there has been a major emphasis placed on a well-balanced literacy program. According to Block, New York City District Eleven's Director of Communications Arts, a well balanced literacy programs contains the following components:

- reading aloud
- shared reading
- guided reading
- independent reading
- shared writing
- interactive writing

- guided writing
- independent writing

The public school at which I have been employed as a first grade teacher, has been implementing all of the above mentioned components into the first and second grade curriculum. The first grade teachers have been participating in extensive on and off site training seminars since fall, nineteen ninety-seven. We have found the independent writing component one of the most complex components to implement. The independent writing component has three different parts, the mini lesson, the actual independent writing activity and a sharing time.

I. The Mini Lesson

The entire class gathers on the floor in a designated "meeting" area for a ten-minute lesson. The mini lesson consists of either a review of the previous learned writing objectives or a new writing objective.

II. Independent Writing

The children take their seats and are instructed to write quietly for twenty minutes.

III. Sharing

The entire class gathers on the floor for the final ten minutes of the writing period. A few children are given the opportunity to share their writing with the class. They read their stories, answer questions about their stories or ask for help.

The most common difficulties expressed by the first grade teachers include high noise level, short attention span, and too many children calling out for assistance. Upon returning to the classroom in September, many of the teachers reiterated the above-mentioned concerns at the first scheduled grade meeting. We were all eager to implement the balanced literacy program from the onset of the new school year, however, we were still quite uncertain as to how to deal with the high noise level and the children's lack of on-task behavior. Several ideas were recommended. One teacher mentioned using a timer as a gauge that would signal the beginning and the end of the independent writing period. Another suggested playing music to drown out background noise that might be distracting the children from their given assignments. After much discussion, we decided that the music could serve both purposes.

The Value of Music

Guastad (1983, p. 67) states that since people first started to sing, music has been an indispensable part of life. Through music children experience pleasure, joy and creative expression, (Eliason & Loa, 1990, p. 263). According to Forrai (1985/1988 p.14) one effect of music is that the child becomes emotionally balanced. Music allows for the development of desirable feeling and moods. It can quiet or calm children, create listening moods or soothe hurt and troubled feelings. According to Cardarelli (1979, p. 3), children and music belong together. He believes that music should not stop at the classroom door or at a

thirty minute a week music class. Music can set the tone; it can make a classroom a happy place. For that reason alone, music should become an integral part of our instructional day. Cohen-Taylor (1981 p. 363) states that because of it's great appeal for children, music is frequently used as a motivational aid to the teaching of reading, writing and other areas of language arts. Music enhances creative and critical thinking, cognitive and affective skills, perception, interpretation, subjective expression, understanding fluency in speech, discrimination and visual literacy, (Wright, 1977 p. 1).

Music in the Language Arts Program

Wright (1977) reviews numerous publications that tell how teachers have used music in teaching language arts skills. Wright (1977) concludes that music can be an effective motivational vehicle for teaching listening, literature, oral and nonverbal communication, creative writing, handwriting, spelling and grammar. By incorporating music into a language arts program Cardarelli (1979 p. 3) believes we capitalize on the interest of youngsters and make learning a pleasant undertaking. Both Wright (1977) and Cardarelli (1979) have proven that music enhances children's learning experiences.

Music in the Reading Program

As noted above, music can be beneficial to children and their learning experiences. However, most research on the effects of music in the classroom concentrates on the relations between music and reading, (Koppelman & Imig,

1995 p. 3). In 1985, Mullikin And Henk, (1985), performed an exploratory study. It was designed to answer the following research question: What are the effects of three types of auditory (musical) background on the reading comprehension of intermediate level students? It revealed that classical music seemed to outperform the no music and the rock music treatment at all grade levels tested (Mullikin & Henk, 1985 p. 355).

Music as an Auditory Setting

According to Lundsteen, (1971 p. 6), man resents high noise level as an intrusion into his physical and mental privacy. Lundsteen goes on to state, (1971 p. 6), that disruptive noises influence both the effectiveness and dignity of teaching. Children in the cooperating Dalton School of New York calmed considerably with the change from the typical noise-box classroom to the school's new sound-treated rooms. Extraneous noise distracts learners, limits their ability to concentrate on the task, and inhibits performance, (Mullikin & Henk, p. 354). When noise diverts students' attention from a given task, the performance outcome will probably suffer. Mullikin and Henk, (1985), feel that using music as an auditory background, helps establish the psychological climate for learning. Apparently certain types of music can relax most learners, drown out potential distractions, and stimulate active reasoning and creativity.

The Value of Classical Music

According to Schuster (as cited in Mulliken and Henk, 1985) one rapidly emerging school of thought called suggestology, uses classical music from the Baroque era way to enhance learning. Bancroft and Yellin (as cited in Mulliken and Henk, p.367 1985), believe that since certain movements in Baroque compositions have a slow tempo of about 60 beats a minute, similar to the pace of the human heart at rest, it is thought that listening to this music reduces the heart rate and blood pressure, thereby eliminating student anxiety.

Music in Conjunction with Writing

It is believed that music increases students' mental imagery and should be used in conjunction with creative writing assignments, (Cardelli, 1979). According to Donlan, (1974), music creates an artificial environment that can stimulate creative expression. Most educators would agree that the majority of students enjoy the music experience whether they are listening to a prerecorded cassette throughout the day or during a "hands on" music class. Koppelman and Imig believe that music can be used in most content areas. They also feel that music in one's classroom may provide a more productive and enjoyable atmosphere for all. After reading about the positive affects music has on many of the content areas, I feel that there might be a distant relevance by incorporating classical music, as an auditory setting into the writing curriculum.

The purpose of this project is to determi ıe if listening to slow temp classical music during independent writing effect children's on-task performance.

The Children

The children in my first grade class at a public school in the Bronx, NY, range from five to seven years old. Seven of the children in the study were male and seventeen were female. Their intellectual ability ranged from those who were below grade level to those who were above the ability level of a first grade child. The children's writing abilities varied from emergent writer to early writer. Two children have been retained from the previous year. All of the children in the study were from a low socioeconomic background. Twenty-one of the twenty-four children received full financial aid from the school's lunch programs. The other three children in the study received partial aid from the lunch program.

Equipment and materials

The equipment used for this project was a timer, a CD and player. This study also required the following materials, pencils, paper, crayons and writing folders.

Procedure

The project consisted of ten individual independent writing sessions spanning a two-week period. The weeks were consecutive and the sessions were held on the five consecutive school days of each week. Since time often

influences human behavior, I attempted to control the time factor by scheduling the sessions for the same time each day. The sessions were twenty minutes. Each week during the independent writing component two different musical treatments were in effect, namely (1) no music, (2) classical music. A timer was used during the no music treatments to be certain that each session lasted for exactly the same time, twenty minutes. The classical music treatment was supplied by playing a prerecorded cassette. The classical music was excerpted from Meditational, Classical Relaxation.

During each of the independent writing sessions either the timer was set or the cassette was played and the children were instructed to "write" until either the timer went off or the music stopped. The first week was the no music treatment, so the timer was used; the second week, the classical music treatment, the cassette player was used to signal the end of each writing session.

Many of the students were not capable of print. There were too few early fluent writers in this project, so it was not possible to use writing content as an assessment tool. The majority of the children were either emergent or beginning early writers. The emergent writers were using illustrations, letters and/or scribbles. The beginning early writers were only capable of single words and some short phrases. Instead, of using word content as an assessment tool, I observed and noted the student's behavior while listening to the overall noise level during independent writing.

On-task behavior consisted of writing quietly, reading work to a partner, staying seated, getting paper/pencils, or going to the word wall for the correct spelling of a word. Not focusing on personal writings, and roaming the room to talk to classmates about non related issues was considered off task behavior. The children's on-task behavior was recorded.

Each child could earn a total of 4 points per day, 1 point for each of the following on-task behaviors:

1. handed in a writing sample at the end of the independent writing period
2. remained seated
3. did not use the bathroom during independent writing period
4. worked quietly or spoke about writing related issues

Each week a child could earn up to 20 points. With 24 children in my study, a total of 480 points could be earned each week.

Expectations

As I began, I expected the children who listened to classical music during independent writing would stay on-task.

Results

During the first week the children earned a total of 304 points for their on-task behavior. Eighty-two points were earned for each writing sample handed in. 72 points were earned by the children that remained seated, 89 points were earned by the children not using the bathroom and 61 points were earned by the children

working quietly. The children were on-task 63.3% of the time during, the no music treatment week.

During the second week the children earned a total of 341 points for their on-task behavior. Eighty-nine points earned for each writing sample handed in, 87 points were earned by children that remained seated, 92 points were earned by the children not using the bathroom and 73 points were earned by children working quietly. The children were on-task 71% of the time during the classical music treatment. I found a 7.7% increase in the children's on-task behavior.

Conclusion

The results of this project demonstrate that playing slow tempo classical music can make a difference on children's on-task behavior. The classical music had a positive effect. The children's on-task behavior increased by 7.7%. The small increase may have been due to the extenuating circumstances, hard to control variables and the fact that there was only one observer in the room. I truly believe that the children's writing abilities and the limited time implementing this project had a major bearing on the results also. Had this project been implemented with early fluent writers, where the writing samples would have been easier to assess I may have found a greater increase in the children's on-task behavior. However, I did find a decrease in the overall classroom noise level. I often overheard the children reminding their classmates to quiet down so that they could hear the music.

After reviewing most of the literature on classical music in the early childhood classroom, I have found that it can only have a positive effect on children's behavior in general. As mentioned earlier, it can calm children, create listening moods and establish the psychological climate for learning. With so many positive attributes, it can only be a win win situation for all.

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